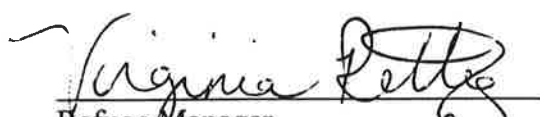
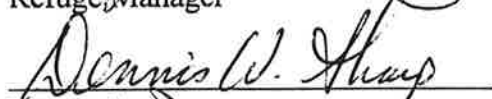


RECREATIONAL FISHING PLAN
CAT ISLAND NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
P.O. BOX 1936
ST. FRANCISVILLE, LA 70775


Refuge Manager


12/11/01
Date


Project Leader

12/13/01
Date


Area Supervisor

12/18/01
Date


Regional Chief, National Wildlife
Refuge System

12/19/01
Date

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I. INTRODUCTION

Cat Island National Wildlife Refuge (NWR) was established on October 27, 2000 in Public Law 106-369, known as the "Cat Island National Wildlife Refuge Establishment Act." The refuge is located in West Feliciana Parish about 4 miles west of St. Francisville, LA. The Nature Conservancy (TNC) initially purchased about 9,500 acres, which the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) intends to purchase as Congressional appropriations come available. To date, 2,354 acres have been purchased from TNC. Additionally, a 13.4 acre entrance road was donated by The Timber Company (the previous landowner) to the Service for access to the refuge.

The acquisition boundary encompasses 36,500 acres, which is the entire area historically known as "Cat Island Swamp." This peninsula is bounded by the Mississippi River to the north, west and south and by a ridge to the east. The refuge is completely inundated by the river almost yearly. Typically, this occurs in March/April and again in June. In 2001, river levels were over 35 feet on the Baton Rouge river gauge, which resulted in about a 5-10 foot rise on the refuge, depending on location. Blackfork Bayou and several canals dug to drain agricultural lands serve to drain and initially flood the swamp as river levels change.

The refuge was established to conserve, restore, and manage native forested wetland habitats for migratory birds, aquatic resources, and endangered and threatened plants and animals. Additionally, it was created to encourage the use of volunteers and facilitate partnerships among the Service, local communities, and conservation organizations to promote public awareness of refuge resources and the National Wildlife Refuge System.

The habitat contained within the refuge acquisition boundary varies. Several types of forested habitat including overcup oak-bitter pecan, hackberry-elm-ash, nuttall oak-ash-sweetgum, and shrub-scrub swamp occur. Additionally, about 4,000 acres of cleared agricultural lands are located in the area, which have been farmed for soybeans for about 40 years. The most unique habitat type, however, is old growth baldcypress-tupelo. Many of the cypress trees are estimated to be 500 to 1,000 years old. The Grand National Champion cypress, which is also the largest tree of any species east of the Sierra Nevada mountain range, is located there.

The Threatened Louisiana black bear is known to use Cat Island NWR on a seasonal basis. Bears probably move between the refuge and the Tunica Hills, including Tunica Hills Wildlife Management Area to the north. Birds known to use the refuge include the Threatened bald eagle, swallow-tailed kites (a species of special concern), and a host of neotropical migrant songbirds, shorebirds, waterfowl and wading birds. Other species of wildlife that occur include white-tailed deer, fox squirrel, swamp rabbit, coyote, river otter, alligator, red-eared slider, and tree frog. Fish species include largemouth bass, bream, catfish, and crappie. Additionally, the Endangered pallid sturgeon and the Threatened gulf sturgeon have been found in the Mississippi River north of the refuge.

II. CONFORMANCE WITH STATUTORY AUTHORITIES

The National Wildlife Refuge System Administration Act of 1966, as amended, and the Refuge Recreation Act of 1962 authorize public fishing on refuges where the fishing program is compatible with the major purposes for which the area was established. The National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 requires that refuges be managed to facilitate the following six wildlife-dependent recreational uses: hunting, fishing, wildlife observation and photography, and environmental education and interpretation. As part of this document, a compatibility determination was performed and assuming that harvest decisions are based on sound biological principles, fishing is deemed compatible and a worthy recreational opportunity to provide the public.

The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System as set forth by Congress in the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997 is:

“...to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.”

Development and enhancement of a quality and biologically sound fishing program that leads to enjoyable recreation experiences, greater understanding and appreciation of fish resources and aids in the conservation of fish populations and their habitats is the overall goal for the fishing program at Cat Island National Wildlife Refuge.

The Refuge Recreation Act requires that funds be available for the development, operation, and maintenance of fishing programs. The operating budget of the refuge is expected to grow over the first few years of the fishing program, which will parallel continued land acquisition. It will cost approximately \$6,000 per year to administer the fishing program, which includes costs for law enforcement and time educating the public about fishing on the refuge. It is difficult to determine the number of anglers that will visit the refuge because fishing is dependent upon the rising and falling Mississippi River.

III. STATEMENT OF OBJECTIVES

The purposes for which Cat Island NWR was established are:

- a. to conserve, restore and manage habitats to contribute to migratory bird population goals;
- b. to conserve, restore, and manage aquatic resources;
- c. to conserve, enhance, and restore the historic native bottomland community and its associated fish, wildlife, and plant species;

- d. to conserve, enhance, and restore habitat to maintain and assist in the recovery of endangered and threatened plants and animals; and
- e. to encourage the use of volunteers and facilitate partnerships among the Service, local communities, conservation organizations, and others to promote public awareness of the resources of the refuge and the National Wildlife Refuge System.

The objectives for the Cat Island NWR fishing program are:

- a. to promote public understanding of and increase public appreciation for the area's natural resources;
- b. to provide opportunities for high-quality recreational and educational fishing experiences;
- c. and to maintain viable, diverse populations of fish species based on sound biological principles and data that seek to maintain populations at sustainable levels.

The overall objective of the refuge fishing program is to provide safe, quality fishing opportunities for the visiting public. Fishing guidelines and regulations will be based on sound biological principles. The fishing program will be compatible with refuge objectives and will not interfere with public use and wildlife management objectives.

IV. ASSESSMENT

As stated above, the current refuge boundary contains 2,354 acres. Over the next few years, the refuge will grow to about 9,000 acres. As land is purchased from willing sellers, the boundary will continue to grow up to a maximum of 36,500 acres. This fishing plan is intended to apply to all future acquisitions, where appropriate.

Fish populations on Cat Island NWR are dependent upon flooding by the Mississippi River. In most years, the river rises high enough to completely inundate the refuge to levels over 15-feet-deep. As the river rises, fish travel into the refuge. Based on collections taken at St. Catherine's Creek NWR, which is located in Natchez, MS along the Mississippi River, fish species that would typically occur on the refuge include white crappie; channel, blue and flathead catfish; blue gill; white, yellow, striped and largemouth bass; spotted, long ear, red ear and green sunfish; freshwater drum; largemouth and smallmouth buffalo; carp sucker; bowfin; and spotted, short-nosed and alligator gar.

River waters stay on the refuge for varying amounts of time. The area may be flooded for a few weeks at a time or for several months. Generally, refuge access via boat is possible

when the Mississippi River reaches 30' (according to the Baton Rouge gauge). At that time, boat access from the Mississippi River would be possible on the refuge. Since 1970, the river level has been over 30' an average of 9 weeks per year. In 7 of those years the river did not reach 30'. Of years that the refuge would have been accessible by boat, the river was over 30' an average of 12 weeks.

As the river levels drop and water leaves the refuge, water is diverted to canals and bayous that facilitate movement back to the Mississippi River. Those waterways are typically full of fish. Depressions and small lakes that remain on the refuge after the river drops, also contain a variety of fish species. Large concentrations of wading birds congregate in these areas to take advantage of this food resource.

Fish abundance on the refuge depends on annual restocking from Mississippi River flooding, and changes seasonally. Providing recreational fishing opportunities on the refuge will not jeopardize the overall fish population. Competition for fish between refuge visitors and wildlife is not expected because many of the areas used by wildlife are not easily accessed by the public.

V. DESCRIPTION OF FISHING PROGRAM

During flooded periods: When the Mississippi River reaches about 30' (Baton Rouge gauge), boat access is available and recreational fishing will be available to the public throughout the refuge. Access to the refuge is via the main canal, Hardwick's ditch, and various canals and bayous that lead to the Mississippi River. After about 37' is reached, the refuge can be accessed directly from the river without using specific routes. Maintained roadways and trails become boating lanes that facilitate travel throughout this forested area. Special care must be taken by boaters when traveling on the refuge. Logs, stumps, cypress knees, roads, bridges, sign posts, and gates could interfere with propulsion.

Because the main refuge access road will be closed when the Mississippi River reaches about 25', boat launching is not possible along that road. Boats may launch at the public boat launch on the Mississippi River in St. Francisville. At times it may be possible to launch small motorized boats, and canoes, kayaks and pirogues near the entrance gate to the refuge when river levels are high. In the future, some portion of the refuge may be restricted to non-motorized boats only.

During non-flooded periods: As the Mississippi River rises, restrictions to vehicular traffic on the refuge begin when the river reaches 23'. At that time, it is still possible to drive onto the refuge to bank fish along the refuge road. However, as the river continues to rise, the refuge road will be closed to vehicles.

As river levels drop, the low-water crossing on the refuge drains a large portion of the swamp. Therefore, it can remain flooded for weeks and restrict vehicular access to most

of the area even though the entrance road is passable. During that time, a gate to be installed at Blackfork Bayou will remain locked to allow the public to fish along the bank of the canal that parallels the refuge road without disturbance by passing vehicles. In addition, launching small motorized and non-motorized boats into Blackfork Bayou may be possible at certain times of the year, depending on river levels.

The western portion of the initial 9,000-acre acquisition area is comprised of a series of sloughs that fill with water when the river rises. As much as 5-6 feet of water remains in those "lakes" after the river falls and throughout much of the year. Those areas are not easily accessed at this time. As they become part of Cat Island NWR, refuge personnel will address the feasibility of providing improved access to those areas for fishing, which includes access via all-terrain vehicles (ATV's). ATV use will only be allowed on designated trails.

If possible, fishing piers will be constructed on the refuge to allow a variety of users to bank fish. However, due to the effect of flooding, pier construction may not be feasible. Additionally, fishing events targeted at youth anglers will be pursued. Providing such events will depend on the availability of refuge staff and funding. Each year the river rises and falls at different times. Therefore, it may be difficult to plan specific events. Refuge staff will do their best to provide such events.

Seasons

Anglers may harvest any fish species on the refuge that is permitted by the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries. Fishing will be permitted on the refuge throughout the year.

Refuge fishing regulations (species, limits and general regulations) will follow State guidelines for fishing in freshwater areas to the greatest extent possible, and will be coordinated with them annually. More restrictive regulations will be implemented, as necessary, to conserve fish populations and provide for safe, quality wildlife-dependent recreation. Refuge personnel will coordinate with the LDWF to manage fishing opportunities on the refuge. Appropriate State licenses and recreational gear licenses are required. No commercial activity is permitted.

Recreational crawfishing will be permitted on the refuge from April 1 - July 31 each year. The harvest limit is 100 pounds per vehicle or boat per day. The minimum mesh size for nets must be a hexagon of three-quarters by eleven-sixteenths of one inch (measured from wire to wire, not including coating). Traps must be marked with a waterproof tag with the name and recreational gear license number of the fisherman legibly printed on the tag. All traps must be attended at all times and may not be left on the refuge overnight. Harvest of unattended traps or stealing by individuals other than those that set the traps may result in conflicts between refuge visitors. Additionally, unattended traps may be lost, which would result in increased litter on the refuge.

Commercial crawfishing has historically occurred in the Cat Island swamp. This includes activities in which traps are baited and set for the capture of crawfish. Generally, an individual fisherman may set dozens of traps at one time and leave them unattended with the intention of harvesting an unlimited amount of crawfish. The draft fishing policy of the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service prohibits the use of unattended tackle by commercial operators on refuges except when used as a management tool. Refuge personnel have determined that commercial crawfishing is not compatible with the purposes for which the refuge was established because it is not a necessary tool used to manage wildlife (crawfish) populations. Therefore, commercial crawfishing is prohibited on the refuge. Commercial crawfisherman requiring passage through the refuge to access leases on private property must coordinate activities with and obtain a Special Use Permit from the Refuge Manager.

No slat traps or hoop nets are permitted on the refuge. Anglers will be required to attend all tackle and must remove it upon leaving the refuge, except for trotlines and yo-yo's. Due to the changing flooding regime on the refuge, there is a safety concern regarding unattended trotlines. Therefore, trotlines must be secured on each end with cotton staging. The use of trotlines and yo-yo's will be permitted, but reviewed by refuge personnel on an annual basis.

No harvest of frogs or turtles is permitted on Cat Island NWR. Harvest of these animals is not considered a necessary management tool that supports the purposes for which the refuge was established.

Enforcement of refuge regulations to protect trust resources and provide for a quality recreational opportunity will occur via regular patrols by refuge law enforcement officers. Currently, there is only one refuge officer assigned to Cat Island NWR, but it is anticipated that additional personnel will be acquired during the first few years of program implementation. The refuge is part of the Central Louisiana NWR complex, whose staff will provide law enforcement assistance until a full complement of refuge officers are employed at Cat Island NWR. Additionally, personnel from the Enforcement Division of the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries will occasionally assist refuge officers.

VI. MEASURES TAKEN TO AVOID CONFLICTS WITH OTHER MANAGEMENT OBJECTIVES

A. Biological Conflicts (also see Section 7 Evaluation and Environmental Assessment)

As stated above, the refuge objectives include the conservation, enhancement, restoration and management of habitat to benefit native fish, migratory songbird and wildlife populations and threatened and endangered species. Most fishing opportunities will occur when the Mississippi River floods the refuge. During that

time most wildlife leaves the area and takes refuge in the adjacent Tunica Hills.

When the river is low, wildlife moves back into the refuge. The area available for visitors to bank fish is small compared to that available to wildlife. Therefore, there will likely be minimal impact on wildlife due to fishing. Refuge personnel may designate specific areas as sanctuary for threatened and endangered species, waterfowl, rookeries or for other purposes, if necessary. Those areas would be closed to all public use.

B. Social Conflicts

Other activities that will occur on the refuge simultaneously with fishing include hunting, canoeing, hiking, birdwatching, wildlife observation, refuge tours and nature photography. No conflict is expected between anglers and non-fishing visitors. In the future, some areas may be restricted to non-motorized boats only to encourage canoe and kayak to access the refuge.

VII. FISHING SPECIFICS

A. Refuge-specific Regulations

The following activities are PROHIBITED at Cat Island NWR:

1. Taking any wildlife, plant or part thereof other than specified in refuge regulations
2. Possession or use of commercial fishing equipment
3. Frogging
4. Harvest of turtles
5. Littering
6. Camping/overnight parking
7. Fires
8. Marking trails with tape, paper, paint, etc.
9. Driving ATV's on trails/roads that are not specifically designated for ATV use
10. ATV tires may be inflated only up to 7 psi and have a maximum lug height of one inch.
11. Riding horses or mules
12. Fishing on the refuge during lottery deer hunts.

B. Angler Application and Registration Procedures

Anglers are required to have a valid State fishing license to fish on the refuge. No registration with the refuge headquarters is necessary. A refuge hunting and fishing permit is necessary to fish on the refuge.

C. Description of Angler Selection Process

At this time, there are no restrictions or limits on the number of anglers permitted on the refuge.

D. Draft News Release Regarding the Fishing Program

The Cat Island National Wildlife Refuge manager recently announced that recreational fishing is available on the refuge throughout the year. Access to the refuge will depend on Mississippi River levels. When the Baton Rouge river gauge reaches about 30', the refuge is accessible by boat and fishing opportunities abound. Prior to that time, some bank fishing opportunities are available.

Fishing regulations generally follow Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries guidelines. All freshwater species that are permitted for harvest by the State may be harvested on the refuge. Recreational crawfishing is permitted between April 1 and July 31. Daily crawfish limit is 100 pounds per vehicle or boat. No commercial fishing or commercial crawfishing is permitted on the refuge. The refuge is open during daylight hours only.

The refuge is accessible by vehicle until the Baton Rouge gauge reaches about 25'. At that point, the refuge can only be accessed by boat. The nearest boat launch to the refuge is on the Mississippi River in St. Francisville.

If you have any questions regarding fishing opportunities on the refuge call the headquarters at 225/635-4753.

E. Angler Requirements

1. Allowable equipment-Use of gear or equipment other than hook and line to catch bait fish is prohibited.
2. Licensing and permits-All anglers are required to possess and carry all applicable State fishing and recreational gear licenses while fishing.
3. A refuge hunting and fishing permit is required to fish on the refuge.

COMPATIBILITY DETERMINATION

Use: Recreational fishing

Refuge Name: Cat Island National Wildlife Refuge

Establishing and Acquisitions Authorities:

Refuge Purposes: The purposes for which Cat Island NWR were established are:

- a. to conserve, restore and manage habitats to contribute to migratory bird population goals;
- b. to conserve, restore, and manage aquatic resources;
- c. to conserve, enhance, and restore the historic native bottomland community and its associated fish, wildlife, and plant species;
- d. to conserve, enhance, and restore habitat to maintain and assist in the recovery of endangered and threatened plants and animals; and
- e. to encourage the use of volunteers and facilitate partnerships among the Service, local communities, conservation organizations, and others to promote public awareness of the resources of the refuge and the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Refuge System Mission: The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.

Management Goals

Fish and Wildlife Populations. Maintain viable, historically diverse populations of native fish and wildlife species consistent with sound biological principles.

Habitat. Conserve, restore, and manage the functions and values associated with a diverse bottomland hardwood system in order to achieve refuge purposes and wildlife population objectives.

Land Protection and Conservation. Conserve natural and cultural resources through partnerships, protection, and land acquisition from willing sellers.

Education and Visitor Services. Develop and implement a quality wildlife-dependent recreation and environmental education program that leads to a greater understanding and appreciation of fish and wildlife resources and enjoyable recreation experiences.

Refuge Administration. Provide administrative support to ensure that the goals and objectives for refuge habitats, fish and wildlife populations, land conservation, and visitor services are achieved.

Description of Use: Recreational fishing is proposed on the refuge. Fishing would be permitted throughout the year. All species allowed by the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries are State limits will be permitted for harvest. Harvest methods, however, will likely be more restrictive than State regulations permit. Closed areas may be established in the future if refuge personnel determine that wildlife are negatively impacted by fishing activity. Some areas of the refuge may be closed to motorized boats in the future as well. Recreational crawfishing will be permitted April 1 - July 31.

Anglers will access the refuge via the main refuge road and Cat Island Road. When the Mississippi River rises and floods the refuge, boat access will be permitted. Access is via Hardwick's Ditch, the main canal, and various canals that feed to the Mississippi River.

Fishing is a traditional use of the area. However, access, particularly by boat, is difficult because visitors must enter from the Mississippi River. Boat launching facilities may be constructed on the refuge in the future to facilitate access.

Availability of Resources: A full-time law enforcement officer and/or several collateral duty officers will be required to successfully administer the fishing program (\$6,000).

Currently, there is only one staff person at the refuge. It is uncertain at this time when additional staff will be hired. Officers from the Central Louisiana NWR complex will assist at Cat Island NWR at high-use times of the season. Also, Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries enforcement officers will lend assistance.

Anticipated Impacts of the Use: One of the primary objectives of the refuge is to conserve, enhance, and restore the historic native bottomland community and its associated fish, wildlife, and plant species. Recreational fishing and crawfishing should not adversely affect the fisheries resource, wildlife resource, or any other natural resources of the refuge. There may be some limited disturbance to certain species of wildlife and some trampling of vegetation; however, this should be short-lived and relatively minor and would not negatively impact wetland values of the refuge.

Time and space zoning of refuge use will be utilized as necessary to minimize wildlife disturbance. The crawfish season will be limited to April 1 - July 31. Problems associated with littering and illegal take of fish would be controlled through law enforcement activities. Providing information to refuge visitors about rules and regulations, along with increased law enforcement patrol, would keep these negative impacts to a minimum.

Based on available information, no threatened or endangered species, other than the bald eagle and Louisiana black bear, have been documented on the refuge. It is anticipated that expected levels of fishing or other wildlife-dependent recreation activities would not directly, indirectly, or

cumulatively impact any listed, proposed, or candidate species or designated/proposed critical habitat. Data gathered from future biological surveys regarding the importance or potential importance of the refuge to threatened or endangered species or critical habitat (or proposed threatened, endangered, or critical habitat), could result in changes to public use activities across time; however, these changes would have no effect on listed species.

Public Review and Comment:

Determination (check one below):

☐ Use is Not Compatible

☒ Use is Compatible with the Following Stipulations

Stipulations Necessary to Ensure Compatibility:

Fishing would be permitted in accordance with State of Louisiana regulations and licensing requirements. An Environmental Assessment is on file at the refuge headquarters as part of the Fishing Plan. The following stipulations would help ensure the refuge fishing program is compatible with refuge purposes:

1. Time, date and zone restrictions may vary in the future as refuge boundaries expand and public use demands change.
2. Vehicles would be restricted to existing roads. All-terrain vehicles would be restricted to designated trails/roads. Off-road travel would be limited to foot travel only.
3. Camping overnight on the refuge would be prohibited.
4. As additional data is collected, additional refuge-specific regulations could be implemented. These regulations could include, but may not be limited to, season dates that differ from those in surrounding state zones, refuge permit requirements, and closed areas on a permanent or seasonal basis (to reduce disturbance to specific wildlife species or habitats, such as bird rookeries, wintering waterfowl or threatened/endangered species, or to provide for public safety).
5. The refuge is open to fishing during daylight hours only.
6. No commercial crawfishing is permitted on the refuge, unless that activity is deemed necessary for management purposes.

Justification: Recreational fishing is one of the six Priority Public Uses made available on National Wildlife Refuges as indicated by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997. This use will allow the visiting public to safely enjoy quality fishing on public land while other visitors enjoy wildlife observation, photography, hike or learn about the natural resources of the area.

Signature:

Project

Leader:

(Signature and Date)

(Signature and Date)

Review:

Refuge

Supervisor:

E. M. Smith

(Signature and Date)

Review:

Regional Compatibility

Coordinator:

Thomas J. Spina 12/17/01

(Signature and Date)

Concurrence:

Regional

Chief:

Howard Portwood

12/18/01

(Signature and Date)

Mandatory 10- or 15-year Re-evaluation Date:

12/13/2016

COMPATIBILITY DETERMINATION

Use: Recreational hunting

Refuge Name: Cat Island National Wildlife Refuge

Establishing and Acquisitions Authorities:

Refuge Purposes: The purposes for which Cat Island NWR were established are:

- a. to conserve, restore and manage habitats to contribute to migratory bird population goals;
- b. to conserve, restore, and manage aquatic resources;
- c. to conserve, enhance, and restore the historic native bottomland community and its associated fish, wildlife, and plant species;
- d. to conserve, enhance, and restore habitat to maintain and assist in the recovery of endangered and threatened plants and animals; and
- e. to encourage the use of volunteers and facilitate partnerships among the Service, local communities, conservation organizations, and others to promote public awareness of the resources of the refuge and the National Wildlife Refuge System.

Refuge System Mission: The mission of the National Wildlife Refuge System is to administer a national network of lands and waters for the conservation, management, and where appropriate, restoration of the fish, wildlife, and plant resources and their habitats within the United States for the benefit of present and future generations of Americans.

Management Goals

Fish and Wildlife Populations. Maintain viable, historically diverse populations of native fish and wildlife species consistent with sound biological principles.

Habitat. Conserve, restore, and manage the functions and values associated with a diverse bottomland hardwood system in order to achieve refuge purposes and wildlife population objectives.

Land Protection and Conservation. Conserve natural and cultural resources through partnerships, protection, and land acquisition from willing sellers.

Education and Visitor Services. Develop and implement a quality wildlife-dependent recreation and environmental education program that leads to a greater understanding and appreciation of fish and wildlife resources and enjoyable recreation experiences.

Refuge Administration. Provide administrative support to ensure that the goals and objectives for refuge habitats, fish and wildlife populations, land conservation, and visitor services are achieved.

Description of Use: Recreational hunting is proposed on the refuge. Hunting would occur during State seasons, generally between October and February each year. Species permitted for harvest include white-tailed deer, squirrel, rabbit, wild turkey, woodcock, and waterfowl. Incidental take of feral hog, coyote, raccoon, nutria and beaver will also be permitted. State limits will be used for all hunts. Deer archery, muzzleloader and gun hunts will be allowed. Big and small game hunting would be permitted during refuge hours. Waterfowl hunting would be permitted Tuesday, Thursday, Saturday and Sunday until noon.

Hunters will access the refuge via the main refuge road and Cat Island Road. When the Mississippi River rises and floods the refuge boat access will be permitted. Access is via Hardwick's Ditch, the main canal, and various canals that feed to the Mississippi River.

Fishing is a traditional use of the area. However, access, particularly by boat, is difficult because visitors must enter from the Mississippi River. Boat launching facilities may be constructed on the refuge in the future to facilitate access.

Availability of Resources: A full-time law enforcement officer and/or several collateral duty officers will be required to successfully administer the fishing program between March and October (\$12,000).

At this time, there is only one staff person at the refuge. It is expected that prior to the initiation of the program an additional person will be on staff. Additionally, officers from the Central Louisiana NWR will assist at Cat Island NWR at high-use times of the season. Also, Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries enforcement officers will lend assistance throughout the hunting season.

Anticipated Impacts of the Use: ATV use on the refuge will have the greatest impact on refuge habitat and wildlife. Noise disturbance to wildlife may be a factor. Wildlife will most likely avoid areas along trails that are continually traversed by ATV's. Wear and tear is expected on trails used by ATV's. To reduce impacts, ATV's will be restricted to designated trails only. Because hunting season occurs from October to February, these disturbances are considered short-term and minimal.

One of the primary objectives of the refuge is to conserve, enhance, and restore the historic native bottomland community and its associated fish, wildlife, and plant species. Monitoring harvest of wildlife will provide a way to measure the health of the refuge. If wildlife populations significantly change, that difference will be reflected in the harvest. The long-term impact of hunting will be monitored in this way on a yearly basis.

Harvest management of big game (white-tailed deer and turkey) is the art of combining wildlife science and landowner objectives for the attainment of a specific management goal. Harvest

management strategies should be based on objectives established as part of hunting plans developed for the area. The objective-setting process must be based on a complete analysis of biological data. Specific harvest objectives allow the setting of hunting regulations. Results of each hunting season would be thoroughly evaluated to ensure that the harvest management program remains dynamic and responsive to an evolving management environment (Bookhout 1994).

Harvest management of upland game and furbearers (squirrel, rabbit, raccoon, beaver) is considerably different from that of both big game and migratory birds. Current literature suggests that user take (<50% of total mortality) of most upland game is compensatory; that factors such as immigration from adjacent areas and density-dependent production operate in most upland game populations; and that hunting does not significantly impact populations. Hunting is substituted for natural mortality. Production of large, annual surpluses of young allows for lengthy seasons and generous bag limits with little concern for over-harvest and minimal chance of population impacts in most areas (Bookhout 1994).

Harvest management of migratory birds (ducks, woodcock) is more difficult to assess. Migratory bird regulations are established at the federal level each year following a series of meetings involving both state and federal biologists. Harvest guidelines are based on population survey data with regulations that are subject to change each year, including bag limits, season lengths, and framework dates (Bookhout 1994). Schmidt (1993) states, "In general, all studies have demonstrated a high degree of compensation of hunting mortality by other 'natural' mortality factors for harvest levels experienced to date." He also reports, "The proportion of waterfowl populations subject to hunting on refuges is very low, thus hunting is not likely to have an adverse impact on the status of any recognized waterfowl population in North America."

Based on available information, no threatened or endangered species, other than the bald eagle and Louisiana black bear, have been documented on the refuge. It is anticipated that the current levels and expected future levels of hunting or other wildlife-dependent recreation activities would not directly, indirectly, or cumulatively impact any listed, proposed, or candidate species or designated/proposed critical habitat. Data gathered from future biological surveys regarding the importance or potential importance of the refuge to threatened or endangered species or critical habitat (or proposed threatened, endangered, or critical habitat), could result in changes to public use activities across time; however, these changes would have no effect on listed species.

Incidental take of other wildlife species, either illegally or unintentionally, may occur with any consumptive use program. At current and anticipated public use levels, incidental take would be very small and would not directly or cumulatively impact current or future populations of wildlife either on this refuge or in the surrounding areas. Implementation of an effective law enforcement program and development of site specific refuge regulations/special conditions would eliminate most incidental take problems.

Public Review and Comment: A public meeting was held on October 18, 2001 at the Health Unit conference room in St. Francisville, LA. The meeting was announced in The Democrat (St. Francisville) and Point Coupee Banner (New Roads) newspapers. About 25 people attended the

meeting. Written public comments were accepted until November 2, 2001. Comments were received from Mr. Chris Davis, a biologist at the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries. He commented that more gun hunts were necessary to regulate the deer herd on the area. He also recommended that the hunts not be subject to a lottery.

Mr. Larry Nicholas commented that he would like to see a check station on the west side of the refuge, not only at the main entrance gate. He would like to see the muzzleloader hunts coincide with State seasons, and not be subject to a lottery. Also, he opposes the use of .22 rifles for squirrels during bow season.

Determination (check one below):

☐ Use is Not Compatible

☒ Use is Compatible with the Following Stipulations

Stipulations Necessary to Ensure Compatibility:

Hunting would be permitted in accordance with State of Louisiana regulations and licensing requirements. An Environmental Assessment is on file at the refuge headquarters as part of the Hunting Plan. The following stipulations would help ensure the refuge hunting program is compatible with refuge purposes:

1. Time, date and zone restrictions may vary in the future as refuge boundaries expand and public use demands change.
2. Vehicles would be restricted to existing roads. All-terrain vehicles would be restricted to designated trails/roads. Off-road travel would be limited to foot travel only.
3. Firearms, bows, and other weapons would be prohibited except during designated hunting seasons.
4. Hunting deer with dogs would not be allowed on the refuge. Use of dogs for hunting rabbit, squirrel, waterfowl, and woodcock would be allowed during designated seasons only.
5. Camping overnight on the refuge would be prohibited.
6. All hunts would be designed to provide quality user opportunities based upon known wildlife population levels and biological parameters. Hunt season dates and bag limits would be adjusted as needed to achieve balanced wildlife population levels within carrying capacities, regardless of impacts to user opportunities.
7. As additional data is collected and a long-range hunt plan developed, additional refuge-specific regulations could be implemented. These regulations could include, but may not be limited to, season dates that differ from those in surrounding state zones, refuge permit requirements, and closed areas on a permanent or seasonal basis (to reduce disturbance to specific wildlife species or habitats, such as bird rookeries, wintering waterfowl or threatened/endangered species, or to provide for public safety).

Justification: Recreational hunting is one of the six Priority Public Uses made available on National Wildlife Refuges as indicated by the National Wildlife Refuge System Improvement

Act of 1997. This use will allow the visiting public to safely enjoy quality hunting on public land while non-hunting visitors enjoy wildlife observation, photography, hike or learn about the natural resources of the area.

Signature: **Project**
Leader: Dennis W. Sharp 11/7/01
(Signature and Date)

Review: **Refuge**
Supervisor: Eric N. Smith 12/3/01
(Signature and Date)

Review: **Regional Compatibility**
Coordinator: Thomas J. Spuse 12/6/01
(Signature and Date)

Concurrence: As fmr **Regional**
Chief: Eric N. Smith 12-13-01
(Signature and Date)

Mandatory 10- or 15-year Re-evaluation Date: November, 2016

UNITED STATES FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

ENVIRONMENTAL ACTION STATEMENT


Within the spirit and intent of the Council on Environmental Quality's regulations for implementing the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA), and other statutes, orders, and policies that protect fish and wildlife resources, I have established the following administrative record and determine that the action of opening Cat Island National Wildlife Refuge to regulated public hunting

Check One:


- ☐ is a categorical exclusion as provided by 516 DM 2, Appendix 1 and 516 DM 6, Appendix 1 section. No further NEPA documentation will therefore be made.
- ☒ is found not to have significant environmental effects as determined by the attached environmental assessment and finding of no significant impact.
- ☐ is found to have significant effects and, therefore, further consideration of this action will require a notice of intent to be published in the Federal Register announcing the decision to prepare an EIS.
- ☐ is not approved because of unacceptable environmental damage, or violation of Fish and Wildlife Service mandates, policy, regulations, or procedures.
- ☐ is an emergency action within the context of 40 CFR 1 501.11. Only those actions necessary to control the immediate impacts of the emergency will be taken. Other related actions remain subject to NEPA review.

Other supporting documents: Fishing Plan, Environmental Assessment, Finding of No Significant Impact, Section 7 Evaluation, Compatibility Determination, Letter of Concurrence, Refuge-specific Regulations.

Signature Approval:


(1) Originator

12/13/01
Date


(2) Regional Environmental
Coordinator

12/18/01
Date


(3) Assistant Regional
Director

12/18/01
Date


(4) Regional Director

12/27/01
Date

ENVIRONMENTAL ASSESSMENT

RECREATIONAL FISHING PLAN
CAT ISLAND NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE

U.S. FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE
P.O. BOX 1936
ST. FRANCISVILLE, LA 70775

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I. PURPOSE OF AND NEED FOR ACTION

The primary purpose of the proposed action is to provide recreational fishing opportunities on Cat Island National Wildlife Refuge. One of the six priority public uses of a refuge is to provide fishing, which is a traditional wildlife-oriented recreational opportunity that is compatible with the purposes for which the refuge was established.

II. PROPOSED ACTION AND ALTERNATIVES

A. Proposed Action (Preferred Alternative)

The proposed action would establish a recreational fishing program on Cat Island NWR in which some time and space restrictions are imposed by refuge personnel, if necessary. The program would provide fishing opportunities for visitors during flooded and non-flooded times of the year. Other uses such as wildlife viewing, hunting, hiking, photography, and birdwatching would be offered simultaneously. The fishing program would comply with all State, Federal and refuge-specific regulations, and Service policies and directives.

B. No Action

This alternative would not allow recreational fishing to occur on Cat Island NWR. Visitors would be prohibited from taking any fish species from the refuge. There would be no change to the current public use and management strategies at the refuge.

C. Open Entire Refuge to Fishing With No Time and Space Restrictions

This alternative would allow recreational fishing on all areas of the refuge throughout the year. No areas of the refuge would be considered wildlife sanctuary, and no areas would be protected for waterfowl use, if necessary.

III. AFFECTED ENVIRONMENT

This section describes the area's natural environment, including vegetation, fish and wildlife resources, and cultural resources.

A. General

Cat Island NWR is located about 5 miles from St. Francisville, LA in West Feliciana Parish on a peninsula that is surrounded by the Mississippi River. This peninsula is along the southernmost unleveed portion of the river. The river overflows the area at least once in most years, and often floods the area twice

(early spring and the "June rise"). Much of the refuge may be flooded at least 10-feet-deep in those instances. Once river levels drop, the refuge "dries up" and can be traversed by foot. Some sloughs and small lakes remain wet for much of the year. There are a few roads on the refuge that allow easy access to the areas open to the public. The entire refuge is a bottomland hardwood forest. Wildlife moves to the adjacent hills seasonally to escape rising river waters. Many species of neotropical migrant songbirds, resident birds, mammals, fish and other wildlife breed here.

B. Vegetation and Land Use

The refuge is comprised of varying communities of hardwoods. Several habitat types including overcup oak-bitter pecan, hackberry-elm-ash, nuttall oak-ash-sweetgum, and shrub-scrub swamp occur. The most unique type, however, is old growth cypress-tupelo. Many of the cypress trees are estimated to be 500 to 1,000 years old. The largest baldcypress tree in the United States, which is also the largest tree of any species east of the Sierra Nevada Mountains, is located on the refuge.

Several canals and bayous traverse the peninsula. These canals were dug in the 1960's to increase the drainage rate of the swamp to aid soybean farmers to the north. These canals, which were not all completed, force water to move off the area at a faster rate than historically occurred. The refuge is surrounded by privately-held lands to the west, north and east. Much of the land is forested and leased to hunting clubs. Several thousand acres is maintained in agriculture and currently farmed.

C. Wildlife Resources

The refuge is a haven for myriad wildlife species. When river levels rise, much of the wildlife moves to the adjacent Tunica Hills and upland areas to the east. This includes wild turkey, white-tailed deer, coyotes, and the threatened Louisiana black bear. Other species of wildlife utilize flooded areas while the river is rising and falling. As the river falls, thousands of wading and shorebirds take advantage of fish and invertebrates in pools and canals. Osprey fly in to feed on fish that are concentrated in these areas as well. River otters are seen in flooded areas that are dry throughout most of the year.

When the river leaves, mammals on the refuge that occur include white-tailed deer, coyote, fox squirrel, cottontail rabbit, Louisiana black bear, mink, beaver, nutria, raccoon, opossum, and armadillo. Neotropical migrant songbirds that breed on the area include Northern parula, prothonotary warbler, painted bunting, yellow-billed cuckoo, and swallow-tailed kite. Resident birds include wild turkey,

wood duck, Carolina wren, pileated woodpecker, and red-shouldered hawk. Wintering birds include blue-winged teal, Northern pintail, American wigeon, and American woodcock. Hundreds of additional species of birds use the area but are too numerous to mention here. Reptiles and amphibians found on the refuge include American alligator, yellow-bellied water snake, red-eared slider, green treefrog, bullfrog, and bronzed frog. Dozens of butterfly species occur including red-spotted purple, viceroy, Eastern tiger swallowtail, giant swallowtail, and Horace's duskywing.

D. Aquatic Resources

As the Mississippi River rises it carries numerous fish species into the refuge. These include white crappie; channel, blue and flathead catfish; blue gill; white, yellow, striped and largemouth bass; spotted, long ear, red ear and green sunfish; freshwater drum; largemouth and smallmouth buffalo; carp sucker; bowfin; and spotted, short-nosed and alligator gar. As the river drops, fish become concentrated in the canals that drain the area. Pools that remain filled with water can hold fish for months. The bigger lakes in the area are breeding grounds for some of these species. The endangered pallid sturgeon is known to occur in the Mississippi River near the refuge. The extent of the mussel population on the refuge is currently unknown.

E. Cultural Resources

Section 106 of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, requires the Service to evaluate the effects of any of its actions on cultural resources (historic, architectural, and archaeological properties) that are listed or eligible for listing in the national Register of Historic Places. In accordance with the regulations under Section 106, the Service consulted with the State Historic Preservation Officer (SHPO) of the Louisiana Department of Culture, Recreation and Tourism.

The SHPO indicated that the proposed action would not likely effect any cultural resources that may be located on the refuge. The future discovery of any cultural resources will be reported to the SHPO immediately.

IV. ENVIRONMENTAL CONSEQUENCES

A. Proposed Action (Preferred Alternative)

Under this proposed action, recreational fishing would be permitted on the refuge. Sensitive areas on the refuge that require designation as sanctuary for wildlife may be closed to fishing. All or part of the refuge may be closed to fishing at any time,

if necessary, for public safety, in response to rising Mississippi River levels or other reasons. Visitors would be permitted to fish on the refuge via vehicle or boat, depending on river levels. All seasons will be coordinated with and within the framework of the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries Commission. Some fishing regulations may be more restrictive than State regulations to meet refuge objectives. As the fishing program on the refuge progresses, harvest information is collected, and public use is evaluated, modifications may be made to refuge-specific regulations and/or the program itself.

The refuge fishing program will allow the general public an opportunity that was once afforded to only a segment of the population. This area has been popular with hunters for decades but to a lesser extent with anglers. Access to the area was previously only possible with a boat. Fishing from areas along the refuge road will provide even more recreational opportunities for the community. It will allow for the consumptive use of a renewable resource without adversely impacting fish populations, habitat or other refuge objectives. Because most fish enter the refuge as the Mississippi River rises, it is anticipated that fish will be harvested at levels sufficient to provide recreational use and still maintain healthy, viable populations. The recreational harvest is not expected to be significant due to restocking of fish from the river.

Recreational crawfishing will be provided along with fin-fishing. The recreational harvest is expected to have an insignificant effect on the overall crawfish population on Cat Island. Wildlife species that forage on crawfish are not expected to be adversely impacted by the recreational harvest of crawfish on the refuge.

The proposed action may result in temporary disturbance to wildlife from boat traffic. Based on historical use of the area, boat use on the refuge is expected to be fairly low. The refuge can currently only be accessed from the Mississippi River and there are no boat launching facilities at the refuge. In addition, time of year and area closures, if needed, would be implemented for both fin-fishing and crawfishing to reduce the impact to wildlife. Fishing tackle such as trotlines, and fishing line left by anglers may pose some risk to wildlife. These impacts are expected to be minimal. Refuge personnel will continually educate fishermen about the importance of taking old fishing line, tackle and traps out of the refuge. Fishing is not likely to adversely impact threatened species on the refuge such as the Louisiana black bear and bald eagle (see Section 7 evaluation). If bald eagle nests are located on the refuge, restrictive zones will be established.

B. No Action

Under this alternative no recreational fishing program would be initiated at Cat Island NWR. If this alternative is pursued, many of the fish that are "left behind" in borrow ditches after the river drops would not be harvested and would expire as oxygen is depleted. Additionally, the public would not be permitted to harvest a renewable resource, which is one of the six priority purposes for refuges nationwide; the fishing public would not have an increased awareness of the National Wildlife Refuge System by visiting the refuge; and the Service would not be meeting its public use demand.

Benefits to the refuge from this alternative include less disturbance to wildlife from boat traffic; no habitat damage by "prop-washing" boats; increased safety from the lack of trotlines that are not removed; and less littering from fishing line and tackle.

C. Open Entire Refuge to Fishing With No Time and Space Restrictions

This alternative would permit fin-fishing and crawfishing on the entire refuge throughout the year. No areas would be closed to fishing or specifically designated as sanctuary areas. No crawfish season restrictions would be instituted. All seasons would be coordinated with and within the framework of the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries Commission. Some fishing regulations may be more restrictive than State regulations to meet refuge objectives.

The proposed action may result in disturbance to wildlife from boat traffic. Closed areas may be needed in the future to allow roosting and foraging habitat for waterfowl. Lack of season dates for crawfishing may result in a premature harvest that reduces quality of the overall harvest by refuge visitors. This alternative would not provide for the future designation of sanctuary, if necessary. The Section 7 review determined that fishing on the refuge is not likely to adversely impact the bald eagle and the Louisiana black bear.

V. CONSULTATION AND COORDINATION

This draft environmental assessment will be reviewed by refuge personnel, the Regional Office of the Service, the general public and personnel from the Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries. Public notice will be given in Fall 2001 to allow the public to comment on the fishing plan.

VI. REGULATORY COMPLIANCE

The actions proposed in the preferred alternative will be carried out according to all applicable local, State and Federal laws.

VII. CAT ISLAND NATIONAL WILDLIFE REFUGE OBJECTIVES

The purposes for which Cat Island NWR was established are:

- A. to conserve, restore and manage habitats to contribute to migratory bird population goals;
- B. to conserve, restore, and manage aquatic resources;
- C. to conserve, enhance, and restore the historic native bottomland community and its associated fish, wildlife, and plant species;
- D. to conserve, enhance, and restore habitat to maintain and assist in the recovery of endangered and threatened plants and animals; and
- E. to encourage the use of volunteers and facilitate partnerships among the Service, local communities, conservation organizations, and others to promote public awareness of the resources of the refuge and the National Wildlife Refuge System.

VIII. FINDING OF NO SIGNIFICANT IMPACT

Cat Island National Wildlife Refuge

The U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (Service) proposes to provide fishing on Cat Island NWR. Fishing activities will be permitted, but administratively limited to those areas specified in the refuge-specific regulations. All or part of the refuge may be closed to fishing at any time, if necessary for public safety, to provide wildlife sanctuary, in response to rising Mississippi River levels, or for other reasons. Alternatives considered included: proposed action, no action, or open entire refuge to fishing with no time and space restrictions.

The Service has analyzed the following alternatives to the proposal in an Environmental Assessment (copy attached):

- A. No action alternative: Cat Island NWR would not be open to fishing
- B. Open entire refuge to fishing with no time and space restrictions: Fishing would be permitted on all portions of the refuge throughout the year with no space restrictions

The preferred alternative was selected because:

- A. The preferred alternative would allow public harvest of a renewable resource, promote wildlife-oriented recreational opportunities, increase awareness of Cat Island NWR and the National Wildlife Refuge System, and meet public demand.
- B. The preferred alternative is compatible with Service policy regarding establishment of fishing on National Wildlife Refuges.
- C. The preferred alternative is compatible with the purposes for which Cat Island NWR was established.
- D. The preferred alternative encourages implementation of all six of the Priority Public Uses as defined by the Refuge System Improvement Act of 1997.
- E. The proposal does not initiate widespread controversy or litigation.
- F. There are no conflicts with local, State, regional, or Federal plans or policies.

Implementation of the agency's decision would be expected to result in the following environmental, social, and economic effects:

- A. The public would be permitted to harvest a renewable resource.

- B. The public would have increased opportunity for wildlife-oriented recreation.
- C. West Feliciana Parish would benefit economically from increased angler/boater visitation.
- D. The Service would be perceived as a good steward of the land by continuing traditional uses of land in Louisiana.
- E. Healthy fish populations would be maintained.

Measures to mitigate and/or minimize adverse effects have been incorporated into the proposal in the following ways:

- A. If necessary, the plan allows for designation of sanctuary areas for wildlife, such as waterfowl, that would be closed to all public entry.
- B. Refuge brochures and publication of fishing information in local newspapers will inform anglers of refuge regulations.
- C. An aggressive law enforcement program will ensure fishing regulation compliance and will protect refuge resources.

The proposal is not expected to have any significant adverse effects on wetlands and floodplains, pursuant to Executive Orders 11990 and 11988 because the area has traditionally been fished by lease-holders with no long-term impacts to wetlands.

The proposal has been thoroughly coordinated with all interested and/or affected parties, including:

- U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Ecological Services Office, Lafayette, LA
- Louisiana Department of Wildlife and Fisheries
- adjacent landowners

Copies of the Environmental Assessment are available from:

Cat Island NWR
5720 Commerce Street
P.O. Box 1936
St. Francisville, LA 70775

Therefore, it is my determination that the proposal does not constitute a major Federal action significantly affecting the quality of the human environment under the meaning of section

102(2)(c) of the National Environmental Policy Act of 1969 (as amended). As such, an environmental impact statement is not required. This determination is based on the following factors (40CFR 1508.27):

1. Both beneficial and adverse effects have been considered and this action will not have a significant effect on the human environment (EA, page 7).
2. The actions will not have a significant effect on public health and safety (EA, page 7).
3. The project will not significantly effect any unique characteristics of the geographic area such as proximity to historical or cultural resources, wild and scenic rivers, or ecologically critical areas (EA, page 3).
4. The effects on the quality of the human environment are not likely to be highly controversial (EA, pages 7, 8).
5. The actions do not involve highly uncertain, unique, or unknown environmental risks to the human environment (EA, pages 7, 8).
6. The actions will not establish a precedent for future actions with significant effects nor does it represent a decision in principle about a future consideration (EA, page 7).
7. There will be no cumulative significant impacts on the environment. Cumulative impacts have been analyzed with consideration of other similar activities on adjacent lands, in past action, and in foreseeable future actions (EA, page 7).
8. The actions will not significantly affect any site listed in, or eligible for listing in, the National Register of Historic Places, nor will they cause loss or destruction of significant scientific, cultural, or historic resources (EA, page 3).
9. The actions are not likely to adversely affect endangered or threatened species, or their habitats (Intra-Service Section 7 Biological Evaluation form).
10. The actions will not lead to a violation of federal, state, or local laws imposed for the protection of the environment (EA, pages 4, 5, 7).



Regional Director
Acting

12/27/01
Date